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THE CIVIC CONTROL OF ARCHITECTURE ¹

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In the robust days of the mediaeval schoolmen, when the newly awakened passion for learning swept students to the University centers by tens of thousands, a sturdy custom maintained which was known as the defense of the thesis. In accordance with this tradition—such was the democracy of those republics of letters—any student, whether native or foreign, to a university, whether known or uncouth, might challenge any of its doctors to debate. In coming before you to advocate a somewhat drastic reform in the present status of architecture I feel something of the embarrassment that those scholastic novitiates of long ago must have felt when they found themselves, with timid theses, face to face with specialists of authority and repute.

As you well know, it is the practice of the English gentry in laying out the grounds of a country estate so to arrange the approaches to the manor that the visitor will receive his first impression from the most favorable point of view. For like reasons I choose to approach my thesis somewhat circuitously, even though the path advance through the shady groves of philosophy.

Despite the later teachings of Ruskin, and the expressive testimony of the whole arts-and-crafts movement, the academic distinction between the fine and the useful arts, inherited by the Renaissance from the Greek philosophy, is still accepted as orthodox by the majority of students. According to this venerable dictum, the fine arts are those which are of solely intrinsic value—giving that pure pleasure which comes from the perception of beauty—which serve no ulterior end, which are not blemished by any taint of subserviency to practical life; whereas

¹ An address read before the Washington State Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, in connection with the first annual exhibition.

the useful arts are those which are extrinsic in value, utilitarian, providing life with the necessary means for existence, or supplying it with its full equipment of moral and intellectual resources. The fine arts are said to find their justification in themselves, and the cry of "art for art's sake" is the slogan of those zealots who would preserve the arts from any possible exposure to the contagion of utilitarianism. It is even a cause of regret to some among the Levites that a fine art may incidentally produce useful results, as if the Creator had for once been caught napping, and suffered pollution of the holy thing.

Far be it from me to speak slightly of the fine arts, or to encourage those who think to take the citadel by seven times encircling it with lorgnette or with prayer-book, yet it is a simple matter of history to demonstrate that the classical distinction between the so-called fine and useful arts is fanciful and theoretic. For example, it must be evident "to half a soul and to a notion crazed" that Giotto painted the frescoes of St. Francis at Assisi with a didactic purpose in view. For centuries, indeed, painting was the recognized and voluntary handmaid of religion, an office, in fact, which she did not resign even after she was conning coquetry from the warm pages of Ovid. In the sister art of poetry, your theorist, to be absolutely consistent, would be compelled to eliminate from the category of fine art all poems written for special occasions, such as Tennyson's noble "Ode to the Duke of Wellington," or Browning's "Why I am a Liberal." Indeed, have we not the testimony of our great epic poet, that in composing *Paradise Lost* he was actuated by a didactic purpose?

How then are the fine arts to be differentiated? Or are there no fine arts at all? I take it that logic admits of only one possible answer: irrespective of the question of utility, wherever an object possesses intrinsic value, and to the extent to which it possesses this value, it is fine art. The question of extrinsic value is quite beside the point. An object may serve some humble domestic office, it may be nothing more than a kitchen utensil, yet if it possess beauty it is a product of fine art. Beauty, which, as a source of pleasure, is the criterion of intrinsic value, is the

offspring of emotion, and wherever an agreeable emotion has effectively assisted in the production of an object, there beauty will inevitably be present. Manufactured articles are products of the hands, with a minimum of brain power; art in the broad sense is the product of the head directing the hands, conformable to Aristotle's well-known definition, "a habit of production in conscious accord with a correct method;" but fine art is a product of head, hands, and heart, and engages and expresses the whole man. When a work of fine art is being produced, the glow of emotion translates the mind into the realm of imagination, the realm where beauty is conceived, a realm whose gates no royal decree can unlock, and which only swing open in mute obedience to that "open sesame" which has been whispered to one in the deep recesses of his heart. Those gates once open, to each artist is disclosed the allotted vision; to one the deathless gods and the circling nectar, to one the sound of pipes and the rhythmic feet of youth and maidens turning in the dance, to one the goodly form of the god-like Achilles, to another the fair abodes of mortal men.

Wherever, then, pleasant emotion is properly communicated to an object of man's creation, there is beauty present, and the presence of beauty is the sole test of fine art.

As beauty expresses the emotion of the artist, so in turn it is recognized by the spiritual sense, and a work of fine art is thus a medium through which we enter into sympathy with the feelings of another. Art is thus fundamentally social. In proportion to the sociality of the artist will be his power, and in proportion to ours will be our enjoyment.

Accordingly, to the broad category of fine art one is compelled to admit all objects possessing beauty, in other words, all objects of intrinsic value. This will admit large classes of objects that are also of extrinsic value, serving some useful office. A Sheraton chair is thus a product of fine art possessing both intrinsic and extrinsic value, for it is a useful article of furniture and it gives pleasure by its graceful lines. A Turkish rug is a product of fine art, for, while the most satisfactory of floor coverings, it is also a source of perpetual joy, expressing

as it does the feelings of a people of imaginative life, notably sensitive and intense. The thousand and one domestic implements of the mediaeval days that the museum at Bruges preserves beneath "the belfry old and brown" are works of fine art, for they were produced by a people who demanded that beauty lighten every task. And our own arts-and-crafts movement, which has gone back to the middle centuries for its inspiration, marks the quickening of art, and not its confusion or corruption.

The assumption that the pursuit of utility is opposed to the production of beauty, which is the basis of the old distinction between the fine and the useful arts, is absolutely valid so far as it goes, but it fails to take account of the actual psychological conditions under which an object both useful and beautiful is produced. The craftsman cannot *at one and the same time* be thinking of the usefulness of the chair which he is making and be joyfully impressing his feeling for line and mass upon the material, for the one is an intellectual experience and the other an emotional. However, it is possible for one state quickly to succeed the other. What the craftsman actually does is first to reckon with the requirements of utility, and then, the restrictions being accepted, to give himself up to the joy of self-revelation, to the imparting of beauty, in the same way, though not in the same degree, as the musician, painter, or poet. From time to time he departs from this happy state of execution to assume the rôle of judge, and to satisfy himself that the demands of utility are not being sacrificed, but the assurance received, once more he is the happy child revealing dreams. Parallel to this experience of the craftsman is that of the spectator; he likewise being compelled to experience separately his recognition of the utility of the object and his pleasure in its beauty.

Reference to utility is simply one more limitation placed upon the artist, for it must not be supposed that any artist is absolutely unrestricted. Every artist must reckon with the limitations peculiar to his own art; thus the painter is restrained by the limitation of his pigments, and cannot possibly secure the higher lights and the deeper shadows of nature; the poet is restricted by meter and by the inadequacy of words. Subjection

to the requirements of utility merely adds one more limitation to those natively inherent. Moreover, just as the severest strictures of the sonnet form serve to stimulate such a poet as Wordsworth to his finest work, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that many an artist in another field has been nerved to his best endeavor by the very exaction of utility.

If all objects that possess beauty are thereby to be ranked as works of fine art, conversely all objects that lack beauty must be excluded. And this must apply to the products of poetry, painting, and music as well as to those of so-called craftsmanship. Exclude all vain and soulless paintings, all musical compositions that are mere exercises in dexterity, as relentlessly as you exclude ugly chairs and vulgar wall papers. All art is activity, but only that art which draws upon the emotions is fine art.

The term *fine art* then is not an aristocratic sur-name, to be applied to all the offspring, degenerate or not, of certain honorable families of art; rather it is a mark of warranty placed upon all products turned out from the workshop of the imagination. This does not mean that all of the arts are of equal rank, that bookbinding and weaving are on a par with painting and poetry, for it is a far cry from such a poem as "Abt Vogler," that portrays the supreme ethical experience of a life, or a canvas displaying such insight as Watts's portrait of Matthew Arnold, to a Navajo blanket, but it does mean that the poem, the portrait, and the blanket have one quality in common—beauty—which differentiates them from all meaner works of man.

And now to turn to architecture, for all that I have been saying is of ultimate reference to that, it is capable of producing fine art under exactly the same conditions as any other art. Genetically designed to serve man's protection and comfort, it may be, and often is, turned to rich account in gratifying his esthetic sense and stimulating and sustaining his moral life. It is usually considered to be inferior to painting, poetry, and music, because less flexible, less versatile, less immediate, less characteristic, less passionate and intense. Poetry and painting touch life at an infinite number of points; their commission allows them to exhaust, if they can, the content of human

experience; their range is unrestricted; they may appeal to the emotions of sex, to the social feelings, the parental, patriotic; and this broad human interest reacts in favor of the work of art, apparently heightening its beauty and rendering the pleasure peculiarly tangible and acute.

How much more vivid and insistent is the appeal in poetry than in architecture is felt on comparing the retiring simplicity of a cottage with, say, the simplicity in such a poem as Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper," romantic, and emotionally acute as it is:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

Just north of Ravenna Park, beside a little tributary stream, is a charming wide-eaved cottage, set back among the daffodils. One cannot see it without a feeling of pleasure, and yet it is only in an indirect way that one recognizes *its* simplicity as what it actually is, the simplicity of a human life, a beautiful trait of character impressed upon a foreign material.

Nevertheless, despite the intensity and the poignancy of the emotional appeal in poetry, music, and painting, there is no other art that compares with architecture in influence upon the life of a community, that has such a strong claim upon the solicitude of public-spirited men, that demands such civic concern.

But before entering upon the defense of such a statement, it is expedient to consider the aesthetic and moral content of architecture. The sense appeal of architecture resides in the happy dispositions of lines, in the management of mass, and to some extent in color. Just why certain colors and certain dispositions of line and mass stimulate the optic nerves pleasantly, and thereby make us happy, it is a matter for physiological psychology to answer; for our purpose it is only necessary to recognize that such is the effect.

But much of the happiness that architecture gives us is derived, not from mere sense pleasure, but from associative moral ideas, supplied by emotion, which exalt the beauty of line, mass and color.

Contrary to the accepted notion, I believe that there is no other art which reveals moral and emotional life with such clarity and fidelity. This is due to the exactions of the material through which the architect expresses himself. Music, painting and poetry can bring out much modulation and shading in emotions, can express moral subtlety, and complexity of feelings. For example, through the flexibility and plasticity of language the poet can exhibit the intricate emotional life of such a character as Hamlet; the architect is forbidden to do this by the very clumsiness of his medium. Stone, brick, and wood are not adapted to such interpretation. On the other hand, however, architecture allows the expression of elemental and uncomplicated emotions or moral states with utmost frankness, and admits of bold, broad, open epic effects. Alone among the arts, it perpetuates the traditions of all early art, for music and poetry were once emotionally uninvolved and broad in workmanship.

Simplicity, sincerity, sympathy, humility, self-control, obedience, faith, joy, gratitude, and their opposites, confusion, deceitfulness, coldness, pride, self-indulgence, wantonness, infidelity, despair, ingratitude, to name only those that first come to mind, are moral or immoral qualities that architecture expresses with great definiteness. It is the merest commonplace to speak of the noble blending of strength and tenderness in Gothic architecture of the spiritual aspiration that resides in its pointed arches and exalted interpretation of light, or to observe that the Renaissance disposition of light and shade in broad masses is expressive of power, or that the Greek temple exhibits poise and serenity. But one does not need to turn to the supreme periods of architecture. One has but to walk along the streets of this or of any other city to find illustrations of the qualities that I have enumerated. To look at the darker side, people are worshiping in churches that, however costly, defy the humility and aspiration that are the very essence of their profession; pupils are daily entering the

portals of school houses that silently, eloquently, preach hardness of heart, hopelessness, the futility of the imagination or of sensibility; and children are being reared in houses that exalt pride, conceit, and falsehood.

Now it may be objected that what I have been saying about the emotional and moral qualities in architecture is correct enough in theory, but that it misses fire in practice because the great majority of people do not pay any attention to architecture. To this I would reply that practically all of the people are some of the time thinking about the character of the buildings that they see, and that some of the people are conscious of the architecture about them practically all of the time. We are very much inclined to underestimate the attention that the less educated classes pay to architecture. For example, of a Sunday afternoon scores of people walk along the streets in the residential suburbs, and they look at the houses and comment upon them, and I have often been interested in talking with working-men to find that they have their own ideas, untrained and crude as they may be, of what is good and bad in buildings. Even were the appeal to most people merely subconscious, the influence would yet be beyond computation; an unobserved yet living force, silently shutting or opening the avenues of the life.

The greater range and vividness of certain other of the arts has already been acknowledged, but what architecture loses in this regard it more than gains in pervasiveness. I read the "Solitary Reaper" once or twice a year, but I walk along certain streets and see certain buildings a thousand times a year. Indeed, the majority of people will not read poetry or listen to good music, and cannot see good paintings, but look at buildings they must. So far as getting a public is concerned, architecture is in a class by itself. We seek out and wait upon poetry, painting, and music, but architecture intercepts our very steps. It must necessarily do more to determine the aesthetic sense of a community than all other influences combined; it is the school in which ninety-nine out of every hundred people get their training in aesthetics. The architecture of a city is therefore a matter of supreme moment to its welfare. If the architecture is

ugly, it is impossible to keep the populace sensitive to beauty. It degrades and vitiates the aesthetic sense, and tends to deaden the nobler spiritual emotions that attend it. It adds to the misery, the stupidity, and the viciousness of people. If, on the other hand, the architecture is uniformly good, it tones the whole community life. Such is the uniform testimony from the "model village" communities.

Indeed, I think that we are not at all aware of the immense social asset that uniformly good architecture would be. Fancy a city in which all of the buildings are beautiful, and trace the influence on the lives of the inhabitants. In the first place, it would add greatly to the happiness of people, for, as has been observed, it is the normal function of beauty to make us happy. Unless we have allowed ourselves to become diseased happiness will attend beauty as naturally as flowers turn to the sun.

Not only would there be this happiness derived from the beautiful houses, but there would be the happiness derived from the many beautiful things that the beautiful houses would demand. Beauty begets beauty, and it is the variest commonplace to observe that when people have one beautiful thing they want other beautiful things to go with it. If one has a beautiful house he wants beautiful grounds, and tasteful furnishings, and good books, good music, and good clothes. A few months ago I had the pleasure of announcing to my little son of five years that there was a new sister who would like to see him. He looked up from the sand house that he was building to inquire if she were pretty. I assured him that she was. "Then," he replied, "I've got to get busy," and nothing would do but that he must take a bath and put on his Sunday clothes preparatory to the ceremony of being presented. If all the houses in Seattle were beautiful, we would drive ugliness from every nook and cranny of the city.

The fact is that it is very hard for a generation whose ideal is *acceleration* to appreciate the value of happiness. So bent are we, I say, on going fast, so absorbed are we in the mere experience of *the going*, that we do not stop to ask where we are going, or to recognize that it is possible actually to "get there;"

or if we do, it is to shudder at the possibility of arrested motion. American men work with an intensity, a greediness that is appalling, and the tragedy of it all is that they do not see that work, at the most, can be nothing but a means to an end. If we ever do *arrive* in this world, or any other, it can only be at one place, the City of Happiness. All other stopping-places are mere way stations, or else on the wrong road altogether. In other words, the attainment of happiness is the only thing that makes effort rational. It is the one spiritual state which has intrinsic value; all work, all religion, all art, can have no significance apart from the securing of it. As men of great vision have always seen, heaven is a state of perduring joy. How vain, then, our living, if we despise or neglect happiness! Happiness is all gain, and every moment of real happiness that people experience is a blow at false ideals, and is a realization of life.

The experience of happiness is always attended by an expanding of the life, an enlargement of the sympathies, a fruitful quickening of the social impulse, and those familiar with the "model villages" insist that this indirect moral effect of beauty is very great. We have all experienced something of this in listening to music or to a drama. The inhabitants of our beautiful city will have ready and discerning sympathy for one another.

Again, these inhabitants will see in their buildings, both public and private, eloquent illustrations of noble moral qualities, and such virtues as sincerity, sympathy, and simplicity, themselves incorporated into the soul of beauty, will in turn inculcate in men and women a like condition.

If this is not the mere Utopia of an idle dream, if it be really desirable to have good architecture, and nothing but good architecture, in our cities, there ought to be some way of bringing the change about. American architecture is, on the whole, improving, and the last twenty years mark an appreciable advance, and yet, under present conditions, two hundred years would scarcely suffice to realize the ideal that I have pictured. Such an organization as the American Institute of Architects is doing what it can to train the public taste and to establish a high standard of production, but opposed to it are not only untrained and unpro-

fessional architects, but a public who, for the most part, have not taste at all commensurate with their freedom and wealth. If now the desired change cannot be effected with the legal status of architecture what it is, is it not possible actually to change this status? I believe that it is so, and I am ready to propose that the municipality assume the task. Is it immoderate to suggest that the municipality, which in so many ways now cares for life physically, intellectually, and morally, should also be to some extent the guardian of the aesthetic life? The power of beauty is the one power of life that government now ignores. It is quite natural that the other powers should be the first to enlist civic interest, for their needs appear to be more pressing, but the time is ripe, I believe, to ask the state to assume something of a supervision of beauty.

But what changes that would not improperly restrict personal freedom, and that would be a proper incentive, and not an improper curb, to the architects themselves, can be made? This question is one that has interested me very much, and, puzzling as it is, by way of suggestion I would like to make certain proposals.

In the first place I would establish the office of city architect as a part of the municipal government. This office would carry a very generous salary, so that a man of real worth could accept it without undue financial sacrifice. To safeguard the office from politics, I would have candidates submit designs to a tribunal appointed by the fellows of the American Institute of Architects.

The city architect would have associated with him a council, likewise chosen by merit. All plans for proposed buildings would be submitted to this body, and those that were unworthy of the city would be vetoed. Of course the architect and his council would not use their office to promote any particular styles of architecture, but would welcome individuality in so far as it was in accord with the correct principles of art. In fact, I would have the office conduct frequent prize contests for various styles of buildings, in order that the architects of the city might be stimulated to their best endeavors.

For every building erected there would have to be an architect's plan, and in order that this might not work a hardship on the poor, the office would furnish a large number of acceptable designs from which a choice might be made. For the plan thus accepted, a nominal price would be paid, and this would be turned over to the architect who filed the plan with the office, and who would superintend the erection of the building. These plans could be used many times, provided, of course, that undue duplication in any one locality were prohibited. In this way I would prevent the erection of characterless little houses, and the practice of stealing plans.

The office would observe hours of consultation, when experts would discuss plans or the larger architectural questions of the city with any who might wish to avail themselves of such service. This would be of peculiar advantage to those men who erect business and office blocks, for it is extremely difficult to make such structures beautiful, with reasonable expense. That it can be done is shown by some of the very tall office buildings, which offer the most trying of problems. Some of these buildings spring with litheness and vigor, and with their severe restriction of ornament to the upper stories have somewhat the character of a good Greek column. The aesthetic enjoyment that they give is often very great. It is to the interest of everyone who builds on a business avenue to have every other building good, in order that his own structure may be effective. Indeed, it is hard for the imagination to picture the effect, or to estimate the business potency, of a street, such, for example, as Third Avenue is to be, in which all of the architecture was harmonious, and mutually attractive and supportive. The business man, his architect, and the city engineer should work out the problem of each building block together. The business man would be watchful for the utility of his building and for its economy, the architect for the preservation of his individuality in his work, and the city architect for the general harmony of the street.

There would also be courses of illustrative lectures to be delivered before community clubs, and in the high schools—if

not in the upper grades—systematic courses of one or two lectures a month running through the four years. I think these lectures would be very seriously received, for I am convinced that the majority of people want to have attractive houses and are eager to be taught what is good.

The office would also have charge of the granting of licenses, in case state licenses were not required, because the city would regard quack architects as equally objectionable with quack physicians or lawyers.

To the architects themselves, I think that nothing but good could result from such a departure. They would be protected against vandalism, there would be much more work for them to do, there would be a more rational and meritorious competition, and there would be the enduring satisfaction of united and systematic effort in carrying out a project in which self-interest and altruism were happily combined. The city would be one vast work of art, to the realization of which each architect would contribute.

In these suggestions, I have not attempted to exhaust the possibilities of such an office, but merely to suggest a general line of procedure which allows of being modified or supplemented. Further possibilities have doubtless suggested themselves to your minds already.

Such a departure as I have proposed would cost, I should think, \$15,000 a year, an average cost of five cents apiece, the price of a plain soda or of a pair of shoe strings, when the city has 300,000 inhabitants. It would result in a city of unique beauty and in a happier and more moral people. And further than that it would be a great stimulus to architecture itself, for it has always been true that the periods of most virile activity in the arts have been those in which the populace at large have furnished an appreciative public. Under such encouragement was the Gothic church, the Japanese print, and the German musical revival produced.

Our city is still in its infancy. Only a handful of really permanent buildings have yet been erected. It is ours to do with as we list. And is not the task one to stir the zeal of youth and

to reanimate the spirit of old age. How fair does the city seem this early summer day! Encircled by the mountains, lakes gleaming in idleness, the ocean at its feet, hills and valleys pleasantly folded together, and the soft haze of May over it all. Such it now is, thanks to kindly nature, and can one reflect temperately upon its future?

How fit to employ
All the heart and the soul and the senses forever in joy!